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Report of the Economic Commission for Africa

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-eighth session,** the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Economic Commission for Africa on regional statistical development in Africa. The report highlights issues and challenges facing African countries in enhancing their statistical capacity. It gives an overview of ongoing initiatives by African stakeholders aimed at overcoming those challenges. The initiatives include the setting up of a statistical commission for Africa (Statcom-Africa) and the African Statistical Coordination Committee. The report also elaborates on a way forward and on the role the Economic Commission for Africa can play in addressing the challenges. The Commission may wish to comment on ongoing efforts aimed at boosting the statistical development of African countries and organizations. It might also wish to call upon all stakeholders, including development partners, to scale up their support for statistical development initiatives on the continent, namely through the African Centre for Statistics. Actions to be taken by the Commission are contained in paragraph 25 of the report.

* E/CN.3/2008/1.
** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2007, Supplement No. 4* (E/2007/24), chap. I.A.

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Report of the Economic Commission for Africa on regional statistical development in Africa

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I. Introduction

1. The last decades of the last millennium witnessed a tremendous increase in the demand for quality statistics in African countries. This unprecedented increase in the demand emanated mainly from a number of national, regional and international initiatives aimed at improving the economic, social and political conditions of African people. These include the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Millennium Development Goals, the poverty reduction strategies, subregional economic and/or monetary integration frameworks and other specific sectoral frameworks. As a result, African national statistical systems and subregional and regional organizations dealing with statistics and statistical development have been not only challenged but also given the opportunity, inter alia, to raise public awareness on the importance of statistics in the development of the continent and in harnessing national, subregional, regional and international resources in building the capacities of African countries to meet the increased demand in quality statistics emanating from their development agenda.

2. The present report sets out some of the main challenges facing African stakeholders in statistical development, as well as some of the recent initiatives aimed at addressing them. The initiatives include the revamping of the statistical functions within major regional organizations, namely, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Development Bank and the African Union Commission; the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa; the African Statistical Coordination Committee; the Statistical Commission for Africa; the Africa Symposium on Statistical Development; and the African Statistics Charter. Furthermore, the present report elaborates on the role ECA can play in addressing the challenges and actions to be taken by the Statistical Commission.

II. Challenges facing African national statistical systems

3. The challenges facing African national statistical systems and other stakeholders in African statistical development are numerous. They include the following:

(a) Low participation by African countries in international meetings and city groups where international standards, methodologies and classifications are discussed and approved. This has resulted in African specificities not being adequately catered to in the said standards, methodologies and classifications and has, in some cases, raised concerns about their relevance to African countries. The issue is how to activate effective African participation in international meetings and discussions;

(b) Prioritizing statistics. The role of statistics is, by and large, not a priority in national development processes and among donor support programmes to countries. At the national level, inadequate political commitment to statistical development has translated into low priority for statistics, inappropriate profiles of national statistical offices in government hierarchy and concomitant under-funding for statistical development. In addition, policymakers in many donor organizations have not been made more aware of the critical nature of statistics in supporting evidence-based policymaking and monitoring. The issues include: (a) how to scale-

up advocacy for mainstreaming statistics into national development processes, in particular into the poverty reduction strategies; and (b) how to give a higher priority to statistics either as a sectoral activity or as a larger part of priority sector programmes of donor agencies;

(c) Lack of (or inappropriate) long-term planning for statistical development. The Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics urges all poor developing countries (many of them in Africa) to design a national strategy for the development of statistics by the end of 2006 and to start implementation by 2007. There are still countries where a national strategy for the development of statistics has not been designed; there are also countries where the strategy has been designed but implementation has been constrained by lack of adequate resources. The issue is how to ensure that all countries have an appropriately designed strategy and the resources to implement it;

(d) Statistical capacity. Statistical capacity is critical for long-term sustainability of national statistical systems and activities. Many African countries still lack the capacity to undertake core statistical activities. The situation is worse in line ministries than in national statistical offices. Training institutions are not producing enough graduates to meet existing demand for trained personnel. There are also concerns that the curricula of training institutions, in particular universities, do not include "official statistics" or practical-oriented subjects or management-related subjects; that the teaching of statistics continues to be undertaken from the supply side in spite of the overwhelming need to also address demand side issues; and that there is insufficient training on data analysis, presentation and dissemination. The issues include: (a) how to meet urgent demand for trained personnel across government sectors; and (b) how to ensure relevance and practicality of training programmes;

(e) International Comparison Programme (ICP) for Africa (ICP-Africa). Many African countries participated in ICP-Africa (2002-2007), which was coordinated by the African Development Bank. The Programme assisted participating countries in strengthening their economic statistics and compilation of consumer price indexes, gross domestic product (GDP) and related indexes; production of purchasing power parities; and general statistical development, including the design of the national strategy for the development of statistics. The issue is how to continue the ICP-Africa initiated activities beyond 2007, when the ICP world programme ends;

(f) The 2010 round of population and housing censuses. Some 17 African countries (about 30 per cent of the total) did not participate in the 2000 round. As a result, about 50 per cent of the African population was not enumerated during the round of censuses; in addition, outdated data or population projections are used in many countries to inform national development agendas and to measure progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. As preparations for the 2010 round gain momentum, there are about 10 African countries which may have serious problems participating in the round. The issue is how to ensure that all African countries galvanize themselves and participate in the 2010 round;

(g) Coordination. Coordination of statistical activities and programmes is essential to achieving synergy, to avoiding duplication of effort and wasting resources and to improving data quality. In many countries, coordination among stakeholders, such as between data producers and users, among data producers and between data producers and research/training institutions, is not adequate. While

there is good coordination among donors at the international level, the same is not the case at the country level. The issue is how to create and enhance coordination mechanisms at the country level among key stakeholders, including donors.

4. To accelerate the pace of statistical development in the region, it is imperative that stakeholders strive to create greater awareness among data users, in particular planners, policymakers and decision makers, about the strategic importance of statistics in their work, particularly in evidence-based macro-economic management, policy decision-making and poverty measurement and monitoring. They should also play an advocacy role to ensure that statistical production and use are given high priority by Governments and donor agencies. By building ample capacity to better assess user needs and to keep abreast of the changing data needs of policymakers, the private sector and civil society would also contribute to those efforts. Moreover, countries should be encouraged to build their capacity to harness technology and to improve the way data are collected, managed and disseminated to users. In addition, countries should build competent user groups to properly understand and interpret available statistical data, build competencies in survey management in national statistical offices, and promote coordination and synergy among institutions involved in statistical activities. These are some of the issues and challenges that should be addressed to meet the increasing demand for quality statistics.

III. Initiatives aimed at addressing the challenges facing African national statistical systems

5. To address the identified challenges, stakeholders in statistical development in Africa have undertaken several initiatives, mainly built on such strategies as advocacy, coordination of statistical capacity-building activities, training and enhancing capabilities, to undertake household surveys and censuses. The present report will put emphasis on some of the most recent initiatives.

A. Revamping of statistical functions within major regional organizations

6. Among the positive developments that took place at the dawn of the new millennium is the revamping of statistical functions in major regional organizations in response to the repeated demands of stakeholders to address the issue of the underdevelopment of statistical activity in Africa.

7. Following the repositioning exercise of ECA in 2006/07, the ECA Statistics Division was re-established as the African Centre for Statistics in August 2006. This results from the recognition that statistics is an important cross-cutting theme, vital to advancing the special needs of African countries, in particular in respect of NEPAD and the monitoring and evaluation of progress made towards reaching agreed development targets, including the Millennium Development Goals. Other regional organizations also expanded their statistical activities. The restructuring of the African Development Bank culminated in the establishment of a statistics department with two divisions, one dealing with economic and social statistics, and the other with statistical capacity-building, making the organization one of the major providers of statistical technical assistance on the continent. In addition, the African

Union Commission has recently set up a new statistics unit within its Department for Economic Affairs and has launched the process for preparing an African charter for statistics.

B. Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics

8. The Marrakech roundtable held in Marrakech, Morocco, in 2004, endorsed a time-bound and costed action plan, the Marrakech Action Plan,[1] for improving development statistics. The Action Plan has six key actions for improving statistics nationally and internationally, namely, mainstreaming strategic planning of statistical systems, especially through the implementation of a national strategy for the development of statistics; preparing for the 2010 global round of population censuses; increasing the finances for statistical capacity-building; setting up an international household survey network; undertaking urgent improvements for Millennium Development Goals monitoring; and increasing the accountability of the international statistical system.

9. The Marrakech Action Plan will be implemented in Africa using the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa as the implementation strategy.

C. Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa

10. To overcome the shortcomings of past efforts aimed at enhancing statistical capacity in Africa, the major sponsors of the Forum on African Statistical Development, namely the African Development Bank, the Partnership for Statistics in the Twenty-first Century and the World Bank, agreed to launch the production of the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa[2] under the leadership of ECA. The framework is expected to create synergies, avoid duplication of effort and lead to sustainable capacity for statistical development in Africa.

11. The Framework is broad in scope, rather than focusing on a specific set of activities and policy prescriptions, recognizing that most actions will need to be initiated at the national level and that countries face different problems and have different priorities. The Framework was endorsed by the heads of national statistical offices in Africa and the stakeholders of the Forum on African Statistical Development in February 2006 and by the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development in April 2007. The primary responsibility for implementing the framework lies with the national statistical systems, with the key supporters being national statistical offices, while implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting on the Framework is to be jointly undertaken by the African Development Bank and ECA.

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[1] Available at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc04/marrakech.pdf.

[2] AfDB, PARIS21, ECA and the World Bank, "The Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa: better statistics for improved development outcomes", ECA Documents Publishing and Distribution Unit, Addis Ababa, October 2006.

D. National strategy for the development of statistics

12. The national strategy for the development of statistics is the overarching action point of the Marrakech Action Plan and the headline strategy of the Framework. The Marrakech Action Plan urged all poor developing countries to design their national strategy for the development of statistics by the end of 2006 and to start implementing them in 2007, with a view to producing better statistics for national and international use by the time of the next millennium review, in 2010. The national strategy for the development of statistics is seen as an approach that has a greater chance of improving national statistics. If properly designed and implemented following the national strategy for the development of statistics principles, which have been developed by PARIS21 and other partners, the statistics can fundamentally change the statistical landscape and enhance the fortunes of the statistical profession in countries. There is a drive to get all African countries to design and implement the national strategy for the development of statistics.

E. Africa Symposium on Statistical Development

13. The Africa Symposium on Statistical Development[3] is a country-led initiative aimed at providing a forum where African countries can discuss issues pertaining to their statistical development on a regionally coordinated basis. The Symposium is organized in African countries on a rotational basis. It considers a number of aspects relating to developing sustainable statistical systems, addresses the challenges of capacity-building and provides a platform for a comprehensive exchange of practical experiences and best practices among African countries.

14. The first symposium took place in Cape Town, South Africa; the second in Kigali; and the third, in Accra. The symposia, which have been organized by ECA, the Statistics Division and South Africa (Chair of the Friends of ECA), have concentrated on sharing information and experiences on the population and housing census.

F. International Comparison Programme for Africa

15. This continent-wide programme involving 52 African countries was launched in 2002 with the objective of strengthening the capacity of African countries to provide timely and reliable data in including purchasing power parity estimates that facilitate cross-country comparisons of price levels and economic aggregates in real terms. ICP-Africa, which is coordinated and led (both financially and technically) by the African Development Bank, has also assisted several African countries in designing their national strategy for the development of statistics and regional statistical training centres in improving their services to countries.

G. Statistical Commission for Africa

16. Following the re-establishment of the Statistics Division at ECA, a new subsidiary body specifically devoted to statistics and statistical development on the

[3] For more details, see the Symposium website at http://www.statssa.gov.za/asc/index.asp.

continent was created. The last Conference of Ministers, held in Addis Ababa in April 2007, endorsed the creation of the subsidiary body in charge of statistics, the Statistical Commission for Africa, as the apex entity in statistical development on the continent.

H. African charter for statistics

17. The Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa urges the African Union Commission to play a greater role in the statistical development of the region, in particular in the area of high-level advocacy for statistics. The African Union Commission has initiated the design, with the collaboration of regional partners, of an African charter for statistics, which will be tabled to the forthcoming African Union Conference of African Ministers of Finance and the Heads of States Summit in January 2008 for endorsement.

I. African Statistical Coordination Committee

18. Following the meeting of the representatives of the African Development Bank, the ECA, the African Union Commission, and the African Capacity-building Foundation, held in Tunis in September 2007 to discuss the coordination of statistical capacity-building work in Africa, it was decided that an African Statistical Coordination Committee be established to lead the coordination of statistical activities in Africa.

J. Other initiatives

19. It is worth mentioning the yearly celebrations throughout Africa of the African Statistics Day on 18 November, to raise awareness in society about the role and importance of statistics in the economic and social development of Africa. The theme for the 2005 celebrations was the 2010 round of population and housing censuses; for 2006, it was the national strategy for the development of statistics as a new benchmark in statistical planning; and for 2007, the theme was the measurement of employment and related indicators.

20. The publication of the *African Statistical Journal* is one of the major initiatives aimed at facilitating the exchange of information and best practices among stakeholders in the African statistical system. The African Development Bank is funding the publication and distribution of the journal. In addition, ECA has initiated the production of a quarterly African statistical newsletter, whose first issue was launched at the Africa Symposium on Statistical Development on 3 December 2007.

IV. African Centre for Statistics: response to the challenges

21. The creation of the African Centre for Statistics[4] is expected to enable the ECA to play its rightful role in statistical development by enhancing the statistical capacities of African countries for better economic management and tracking of progress towards the achievement of gender equality and internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals.

22. To achieve this, the African Centre for Statistics has developed a programme aimed at revitalizing and better coordinating statistics at the ECA secretariat, enhancing its statistical coordination function and helping to strengthen the capacities of statistical systems in Africa. It takes into account the core functions of ECA and the work programmes of various stakeholders in statistical development in Africa, in particular the African Development Bank, the African Capacity-building Foundation and the African Union Commission, ensuring that duplication is avoided and synergy is built among the actors. It also considers the various challenges facing Africa in statistical development and is built on a set of strategies aimed at overcoming them.

23. The programme has six components, namely, the African Population and Housing Census Programme, aimed at preparing African countries to fully participate in the 2010 round of population and housing censuses; re-engineering household surveys in Africa aimed at upgrading the capabilities of countries to meet the increased demand in statistics emerging from national, subregional, regional and international development agendas; economic statistics to support countries in their quest to comply with international standards and norms; statistical training to help countries address the issue of human resources; coordination of statistical development activities aimed at addressing the issue of uncoordinated statistical development efforts; and statistical data management to provide stakeholders with quality statistics on African countries.

24. In addition, the African Centre for Statistics will be acting as the secretariat to the following bodies: the Statistical Commission for Africa, the African Statistical Coordination Committee and the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa coordination committee.

V. Actions to be taken by the Statistical Commission

25. The present report has set out some of the major challenges facing the African continent in terms of statistical development as well as some of the initiatives aimed at addressing them. The Commission may wish to express its views on the following initiatives in order to improve the capacity of African countries to respond to the increased demand for quality statistics emanating from their development agendas:

(a) Recognition of the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa as the framework through which all development efforts geared towards statistical development in the African region have to be channelled;

[4] Details on ACS can be found in the document: "*Strategic and business plan for the development of statistics: better statistics for better policies and development outcomes*", ECA, September 2006.

(b) Calling upon African countries and development partners to give a higher priority to statistics in their development programmes and to support mainstreaming of statistics in country development processes including the poverty reduction strategies;

(c) Calling upon all African countries to design effective national strategies for the development of statistics and for development partners to assist in both the design and implementation of the statistics;

(d) Calling upon development partners to support African countries in fully participating in the 2010 round of popu!ation and housing censuses;

(e) Calling upon development partners to support African countries through coordination mechanisms put in place by African stakeholders, including the Statistical Commission for Africa, the Reference Regional Strategic Framework for Statistical Capacity-building in Africa coordination committee and the African Statistical Coordination Committee;

(f) Providing support to the overall programme of work of ECA in statistics and its coordination role in various bodies, including the Statistical Commission for Africa, the African Statistical Coordination Committee and others.